

SMALL ANIMAL
DELAWARE
VETERINARY GROUP

Empathy for you – compassion for your animals



SETTING YOUR
KITTEN UP FOR
SUCCESS!

How to **prevent** some
problem kitten behaviours



New kitten: How to prevent some problem behaviours

Body language and interactions

It is important to have a basic understanding of your kitten's body language, so you are able to figure out how they are feeling or when is a good time to interact with them and when to leave them alone. If you approach your kitten when they would prefer to be left alone it can cause them unnecessary stress. This stress can lead to aggression towards you from hissing and growling to biting and scratching. Kittens will perform these behaviours to make sure they are left alone. Body language and behaviours that indicate your kitten would like to interact with you include:

- ✓ relaxed almond shaped eyes
- ✓ ears in a normal up right position
- ✓ tail up and with a possible curve on the end making the tail look like a ?
- ✓ body posture will be relaxed
- ✓ the kitten approaches you by choice
- ✓ if you move away the kitten will follow you
- ✓ your kitten will rub its face and/or body on you or a nearby object
- ✓ they may perform a social roll. This is where they will roll onto their back showing their belly. Don't make the mistake that this is an invitation to stroke your kitten's tummy as many cats do not like this. It is purely an indication that they want to be social with you.



Signs to look for to not initiate or stop interaction with your kitten:

- ✓ thrashing of the tail
- ✓ fur along the back and tail standing on end
- ✓ body posture is hunched, close to the ground with feet under their body
- ✓ ears rotated and flattened towards the head
- ✓ running away from you
- ✓ body looks tense
- ✓ tail wrapped very tightly around the body



It is always best to approach your kitten slowly while talking to them quietly. Making direct eye contact can be seen as a threatening sign so always look just above their head or to one side.

Reaching a closed hand out to your kitten to sniff before stroking them will be less threatening to them.

Cats like to be in control of everything they do so any restraint can be stressful for your kitten. It is important to get them used to being handled by using positive reinforcement. This means getting them used to being handled slowly while rewarding them, so they view being handled in a positive way to help reduce stress, frustration and fear. An example of this is getting them used to being groomed. First you would let them sniff the brush and then give them a reward. Once they are comfortable around the brush you would brush them once and give them a reward. Eventually you should be able to groom them several times before giving them a reward.

A reward can be anything from a treat, to being stroked (if they love attention) or a play session. Getting your kitten used to being handled in a positive way will not only help reduce stress to your kitten but will also make your life easier. You can use positive reinforcement to get them used to being picked up, giving medications, trimming their nails, grooming, examining them or getting them used to going into a cat carrier.



House Training

Kittens don't normally need much in the way of litter training. It is important to allow your new kitten to explore its litter tray in its own time before it needs to use it. If you see your kitten about to go to the toilet outside of the litter tray just gently pick them up and place them in the nearest tray. Never scold your kitten if they have an accident outside of the tray as this will cause them stress. The normal behaviours to look out for to see if your kitten is going to go to the toilet are:

- ✓ Sniffing at the area it is intending to go to the toilet on.
- ✓ They will then dig at the area, even if there is nothing to dig they will still do the action.
- ✓ Once they have finished digging they will squat over the area.
- ✓ After they have been to the toilet they will dig over the area.

- ✓ Litter trays should be placed in quiet areas of the home. Away from food and water stations. Cats don't like to toilet where they eat and drink so if their litter trays are near their food they might find other areas to go to the toilet.
- ✓ The litter tray should be big enough for your kitten to move around even when it is fully grown. A good guide is to have a litter tray that is one and a half times the length of your cat.



If we don't get our kittens toileting facilities correct it can cause them to toilet in inappropriate areas of the home. It is not only due to not having the correct facilities but also the stress they can go through when the correct facilities are not available.

- Some kittens like to pass urine and faeces in separate litter trays and not many cats like to share litter trays. With this in mind it is really important to provide enough litter trays throughout the home for the amount of cats living with you. Ideally you should have one litter tray per cat plus one extra all in separate rooms of the home and not placed next to each other. This will ensure your kitten has the facilities to urinate and defecate in separate trays. It also means in multi cat households the cats can go to the toilet without having to share or confront each other which can be very stressful.
 - The cat litter should be one that your kitten is already used to. If you don't know what litter your kitten is used to then most kittens/cats prefer fine granular litter.
 - The litter used should be unscented as scented cat litter can put kittens off from using the litter tray.
 - The litter should be deep enough for your kitten to bury its waste. Ideally 5-8cm deep.
 - Your kitten will feel vulnerable when they are going to the toilet so positioning litter trays away from doors, windows and cat flaps will help them feel safer and means they are more likely to use the litter tray.
 - Covered litter trays might give your kitten security when going to the toilet but in multi cat households this might not be a good idea. This is because covered litter trays only have one exit, so cats can be blocked in the litter tray by other cats in the household.
- Dirty litter should be scooped at least twice a day but ideally after every time it has been used. Your kitten might not want to use a dirty litter tray and might find somewhere else to go to the toilet.
 - Litter should be completely emptied once a week and the tray washed with washing up liquid and then rinsed.
 - Avoid using litter tray liners as these can put your kitten off from using the tray.
 - Litter trays should always be provided for your kitten even into adult hood when it might be going to the toilet outside. This is to prevent them from toileting in the home if access outside is restricted or if there are threats outside preventing them from venturing out to go to the toilet.



Play

Play is a normal part of your kitten's behaviour. When kittens play they are practicing their hunting skills. Play also provides physical exercise for your kitten and help them develop co-ordination. When your kitten is playing with toys they will have a sequence they will follow:

- ✓ Search
- ✓ Stalk
- ✓ Chase
- ✓ Pounce

Playing with your kitten will help provide them with positive emotions which will help with their overall mental health. It is important to play with your kitten throughout its life even in adulthood. You can use a variety of shop bought toys like fishing rod toys, catnip mice and mechanical operated toys. You can also use house hold items for your cat to play with like scrunched up paper, milk bottle tops, pieces of string and ping pong balls.



It is best to avoid laser pens for your kitten to chase as they are unable to finish the pray sequence of catching a physical item. This can cause them to become frustrated which can result in problem behaviours like over grooming, aggression, inappropriate toileting, attention seeking or destructive behaviours. These problem behaviours can also occur if you don't give your kitten the opportunity to play. Some people like to let kittens play with their hands or feet by moving them quickly along the floor. If you start to play with your kitten using your hands or feet, they will see this as normal acceptable behaviour and will continue to do this into adulthood. Having a kitten biting and scratching your hands/feet in play might not hurt much but this will become painful as your kitten gets bigger.

If you already have a cat in your home, then your kitten might try and play with them. Some cats might play with kittens well, but kittens are usually too boisterous for older cats and play can turn into aggression towards each other. If you have 2 kittens from the same litter you will find they will play together better than an older cat and kitten. You shouldn't hear any hissing or growling during play and if you do then the cats aren't compatible play mates.



Scratching

Scratching objects is a normal behaviour for any kitten/cat. They will scratch to:

- ✓ Sharpen their claws
- ✓ Remove old parts of the claws
- ✓ To exercise and maintain the muscles that are used to retract their claws
- ✓ A way of communication with other cats.

Cats will scratch trees and fences in the garden to tell other cats that this is their territory. They will also do this in the home but if scratching posts are not provided they are likely to scratch your furniture, door frames or carpets.

If your kitten is scratching your furniture it can be a problem, but can be easily fixed by providing alternative scratching areas and positioning them correctly. Cats like to scratch near entrances and exits so positioning your kittens scratch post near a door, even an internal one will help to encourage your kitten to use it. Some kittens like to scratch horizontal scratching pads instead of vertical scratching posts. If you're not sure which one your kitten would prefer you can provide both and let your kitten choose.



If your kitten is already scratching unwanted areas, then you can also do the following:

- ✓ Place the scratch post as near to the unwanted scratched area as possible. The post will not have to stay there permanently as once your kitten is using it regularly it can be moved slowly an inch at a time to a different area.
- ✓ You can rub the post on the previously scratched area to pick up the scent from your kitten's feet.
- ✓ If your kitten is scratching the carpet then they might prefer a scratch pad that should be put over the previously scratched area.

Never tell your kitten off if it scratches your furniture as this can cause your kitten to become stressed. Your kitten will be conflicted by wanting to perform a normal behaviour of scratching but being told off for it.

Make sure any scratching post/pad you choose is sturdy, so they don't move when your kitten is using them. Scratching posts should be tall enough so when your kitten is an adult it can stretch its full body length up the post to scratch. Ways you can help get your kitten to use the post include:



- ✓ Making scratch marks down the post with a blunt instrument. Most cats will scratch where there are already scratch marks.
- ✓ Getting scent from your kitten's feet by gently rubbing their feet with a dry cloth and then rubbing the cloth on the post.
- ✓ You can play with your kitten near/ around the post to give a positive association to the post. Some kittens will also scratch/climb up scratch posts during or shortly after play.
- ✓ Feliscratch is a product on the market that can be used to attract your kitten to use a scratching post. It uses dye to mimic scratch marks and a copy of the scent found on cat's feet to attract cats to the post.

Feeding

Cats are solitary hunters/feeders and therefore we need to keep this in mind when deciding on the best place and way to feed our kittens.

Using puzzle feeders instead of bowls can be a great way to:

- ✓ Prevent over eating
- ✓ Mimic natural feeding
- ✓ Encourage mental and physical stimulation
- ✓ Reduce signs of stress
- ✓ Decrease aggression towards other cats or humans
- ✓ Eliminate attention seeking behaviour like vocalisation or destructive behaviour

In the wild kittens/cats would spend a great deal of time hunting. By placing the food in the bowl, our kittens/cats have more time to become bored and frustrated. Puzzle feeders give our cats more to do helping to prevent boredom and frustration. It is also a good idea to weigh out your kittens daily allowance of food and feed this in at least 5 portions in the puzzle feeders. By doing this you are mimicking your kittens natural feeding behaviour of eating little and often which will help prevent obesity.

You can also make your own puzzle feeders rather than buying some. Puzzle feeders can be made out of yogurt pots, cardboard tubes or egg cartons.



As cats are solitary feeders they need to feel safe and secure while feeding and they can't do this when they are fed with other cats or in noisy, busy areas. Placing your puzzle feeders away from windows, glass doors or cat flaps will help your kitten feel safe and secure from potential outside threats like other cats that could be looking into the house. It is also important to place puzzle feeders away from walls, so they can survey their surroundings while eating.



If you have more than one cat it is important **NOT** to feed your cats together in the same place. Cats will find eating with other cats, even ones they get on well with stressful due to being solitary feeders. With this in mind several feeding stations should be placed around the house in quiet areas. Not only is this a good idea for multi cat households so the cats can avoid each other at feeding times but will also encourage single cats to explore their environment to find their food. Some of these feeding stations should be off ground level as cats feel safer when they are up high.

Being stressed while eating can cause:

- ✓ Vomiting after feeding
- ✓ Weight gain due to eating quickly but also if cats are stressed when they eat the energy they are taking in is stored as fat.
- ✓ Over grooming
- ✓ Aggression between cats in the household normally outside of feeding time.
- ✓ Decreased eating
- ✓ Decreased interest in play or interaction with owners
- ✓ Toileting in inappropriate places



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